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## Soviet role in Gulf war

WASHINGTON - If western intelligence is correct and the Soviet Union has agreed to supply new medium-range missiles to Iraq with which it can attack Iran's principal oil port at Kharg Island, the war in the Persian Gulf will have entered a worrisome stage.

While Iraq has been blasting away from time to time at oil tankers near Kharg, it has been unwilling to send its fighter-bombers against the port for fear of taking casualties from Hawk air-defense batteries. But surface-to-surface missiles have no pilots. If there are enough of the missiles and they are accurate enough, they could do much to stifle Iran's oil exports, without which it cannot long sustain its economy or war effort.

It was to try to bring pressure on Iraq to stop attacking ships near Kharg that Iran recently started attacking Saudi and Kuwaiti tankers outside the war zone.

One of the most puzzling questions is what would impel the Kremlin to provide dramatically new military capability to Iraq.

The conventional wisdom is that the Soviet Union has decided an Iranian victory could spread revolutionary Islamic doctrine throughout the region, potentially even into Soviet Central Asia with its large Moslem population. Furthermore, by siding with Iraq, it would be sending a message to the Arab world that Moscow, not Washington, offers the best protection against Iran.

Since the United States is also tilting toward Iraq, the Russians presumably would not be risking a confrontation with the US by a more venturesome military supply role and might win themselves a place in arbitrating a peace settlement.

Finally, the West wouldn't have an excuse to establish a permanent military presence in the Gulf if the Soviet missile gambit worked.

For this analysis to hold, the Russians would have to assume Iran will sue for peace with Iraq rather than see Kharg - and oil revenues - choked off by missile bombardment.

On the other hand, it might be even more likely that Tehran will lash out at more Gulf states' super-tankers or even oil facilities ashore in order to scare the West and Arab oil producers into forcing Iraq to desist from its escalation. Zealots tend not to flinch at the first sign of danger, especially if they seek martyrdom.

The Soviets know that Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states don't want to invite western military intervention, any more than the West wants to intervene.

But what if Moscow, in its current testy mood, wants the West to intervene - ineffectively and potentially disastrously?

The Russians know the US, Britain and France would want to do the least possible; thus they could be expected first to escort oil tankers and provide air protection overhead. But then, what if Iran were able to blow up a ship or a Saudi oil facility despite this western show of strength?

The instinctive reaction among senior officials around a President running for re-election might be to teach Ayatollah Khomeini a lesson - both for challenging western power and resolve and for the past

hostage outrage. The best way to do that would be to knock out the small, American-trained Iranian air force.

A few squadrons of fighter-bombers could probably destroy most of the 40 to 50 Iranian F4, F5 and F14 fighters in a few days. But in the process a few American planes might be lost and some pilots captured.

Suddenly Ronald Reagan could find himself in the same political jam as Jimmy Carter did. Would he threaten to send in the Marines to free the hostages, or bomb Iran? Hardly.

His carefully crafted image as a cautious warrior and statesman would be demolished - and possibly his re-election prospects.

So the Russians may be playing for very big stakes in the Persian Gulf.

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